



Writing for ACTSC  
students: Easy to say,  
but do?

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UNIVERSITY OF  
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**WRITING CENTRE**

# Judi's role at the University

- To address the growing concern of co-op employers about workplace communication skills
- To develop strategies for establishing English language competency as a degree requirement, as recommended by the Stublely report (2012)
- To oversee pilot projects to establish best practices
- To establish a cohesive, university-wide approach to development of English language competency, an approach which reflects that this competency requires **“continual practice with informed feedback and guidance”** (Report, p. 20)

# Pilot study in ACTSC (2013 – 2014)

**In Fall 2013, 215 Actuarial Science students (179 frosh) completed a 2-draft writing assignment (worth 25%) replacing one of two midterms**

- Assignment called for three pieces of writing (3 x 800 words), all with different audiences
- Assignment contrasted business and academic genres (memos vs exam question)
- Three 45-minute extra classes helped students understand requirements and expectations
  - Class 1: assignment debrief
  - Class 2: peer review of Draft 1
  - Class 3: revision checklist before Draft 2
- Students were given a formatted blank to use as a model
- Students were encouraged to attend Writing Centre and Student Success study sessions

# The challenge? Marking that's effective and efficient!

- 4 TAs hired from pool of Actuarial Science graduate students, 1 from English (not Rhetoric)
- Generally confident writers but concerned about ability to identify and label errors
  - Marker training and norming with Centre for Teaching Excellence collaboration meant a focus on revision-oriented feedback, not editing
  - Marker support (>8 hours) was provided during first draft marking with lots of comparison
  - Slight recalibration of grades was needed to ensure consistency across the five markers

# Results? First draft

Marked first drafts (hard copies) were returned to students, who received . . .

- formative feedback
- a checklist of recurring errors (content, style, format, mechanics) to watch out for in the final draft
- the schedule of writing centre consultation hours
- a list of online resources for grammar and vocabulary
- access to the writing instructor if needed (<5%)

# Results? Second draft

Second drafts were marked online following the same rubric. Students received summative feedback.

Attention to formative feedback weighed in at 50% of final assignment grade. As expected, grades improved considerably!

	MAX	AVERAGE	MODE	MEDIAN	ST DEV
F13 D1	88	66.82	68	69	12.11
F13 D2	95	76.12	83	77	11.3

# What we learned . . .

- We don't need to ask so much of the students!
- There's real value in formative feedback: virtually every student improved the final draft significantly (as reflected in the markers' impressions—and the marks)
- On a final draft, students care more about marks than about feedback: <10% opened the 2<sup>nd</sup> draft feedback box on LEARN
- It's worth letting the Writing Centre know the expectations of the assignment so that tutors can provide the best support possible
- TAs reported having learned to improve their own writing (4/5 were willing to stay on as TAs)

# What we did in W14 and S14 . . .

- Used Turnitin because the same assignment prompts were used
- Reduced the number of pieces of writing from 3 to 2
- Required students to turn in the original marked first draft along with the final draft
- Repeated marker training
- Surveyed the students



# Results this time?

	MAX	AVERAGE	MODE	MEDIAN	ST DEV
W14 D1	84	58.5	63	60	14.4
W14 D2	95	71.8	69	73	12.2
S14 D1	86	64.7	65	64	8.76
S14 D2	94	75.3	73	75	7.06

## Comparison of Fall, Winter, and Spring?

	F13	W14	S14
#students	236	272	67
#frosh	219	179	22
% frosh/students	92.8%	65.8%	32.8%
Attendance at Extra Class 1	43.3%	52.7%	38.7%
Improvement from D1 to D2	9.3%	13.3%	10.6%

# What did the W14 survey (N= 193) tell us?

- 89.5% spoke positively about having two drafts instead of one
- 76.2% attended at least one extra class
- 64.5% said they found the assignment checklist very helpful
- 54.7% said they found the marker's comments very helpful on their first draft
- 47.1% said they found the assignment provided valuable practice
- 45.9% consulted the writing centre at least once
- 32.0% said that reading more would help them write better
- 23.8% said they planned to take a writing course to help them improve
- 14.7% said they'd attend the writing centre for extra help with writing

# Spring 2014: Report Writing Practice

- 81 MTHEL 131 graduates from 2013-2014 completed an online technical report writing course in Spring 2014 while on co-op
  - We encouraged them to complete a first draft of their major project to benefit from the feedback that they say they like.
  - 19% did (compared to 11% of the whole class) and fared considerably better

	MTHEL 131 Draft 1	MTHEL 131 Draft 2	PD2 Report Grade	PD2 Final Grade
Average mark for 2-draft PD2 writers (15)	72.4	80.2	72.9	82.4
Average mark for all MTHEL 131 alumni (81)	70.2	79.8	66.8	74.1
Average for all MTHEL 131 students (575)	63.3	74.3		
Average for all PD2 students (792)			65.3	70.1

# What's next for ACTSC students?

- Many students will be taking an ENGL or ESL course to complete their English language proficiency requirement (under review)
- ACTSC is continuing to require a two-draft writing assignment in MTHEL 131, now marked by a team of writing professionals supervised by a writing centre instructor
- In 2<sup>nd</sup> year, STAT 231 will require written answers on midterms and finals (including workshops on how to write such answers)
- Co-op students complete 4 work-term projects and reflections

Students need to keep writing throughout their studies or the improvements we've seen won't be sustained. How we do this is an ongoing challenge.

But the Faculty is committed to promoting the notion that  
**COMMUNICATION MATTERS!**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0vGz0UMSIG4>  
<https://uwaterloo.ca/math/current-undergraduates/english-language-proficiency/mathematics-and-communication>